I continue to follow with interest the progress on the congestion problem at Chicago's ORD airport. As an employee of an airline and a resident of the Chicago area, I see first hand how the current situation effects both the flying public and the employees of the airlines.

I think everyone recognizes that the long term solution for capacity enhancement is more runways. I will leave the argument for whether that should be at ORD or a different location for a later date. Regardless of where those runways end up, they are years away and we have problems that need to be addressed today. Since it seems that no other airlines are willing to help and American and United are (justifiably) upset about how there reductions have just meant additional flights for other carriers, I think you have a tool that you currently use that could be modified to get your desired results.

Today, when demand exceeds capacity at an airport such as ORD, the ATC system handles this through the use of either a Ground Delay Program or a Ground Stop. Both of these succeed at reducing the amount of inbound traffic, but cause major problems for the traveling public and the airlines. They also tend to punish/delay everyone equally. While that seems O.K., what it has created is a situation where there is no penalty for adding flights that goes to the carrier that has added them and there is no penalty for inefficiently using the airspace around ORD. The most recent example of this is what has happened with Independence Air. They are operating 12 flights a day that carry a maximum of 600 passengers. That is horribly ineffecient use of the ORD airspace, but the delays that those 12 airplanes caused are spread to all carriers equally. Three 757's could have carried in the 600 people and reduced the number of arrivals by 9.

It is obvious in the current system that none of the carriers want to reduce there schedules. Who can blame them. In the current system there is no significant penalty for flooding the skies with small airplanes and there is a financial reward for having the most frequencies. The most frequencies translates into more choices for the public which translates into being the carrier of choice. Ironically, this desire to provide the most choices to the flying public ends up giving the public a great number of choices that are all suseptable to massive delays whenever the weather detiorates.

This leads to my proposal. Simply change the way Ground Delay and Ground Stop programs are administered. Rather than delaying everyone, issue the delays based on aircraft gross weight or seating capacity. In this way you more efficiently use the airspace around ORD in two ways. First when the weather is bad you are handling the greatest number of passangers in your airspace/per plane. Secondly and much more importantly, you will effect the way airlines schedule their airplanes. There will now be an incentive to have one medium airplane rather than 2 small. If you look at the DSM-ORD market you can see that there are about 12 small airplanes a day on that route. In the past both United and American would add a frequency to that route to remain competitive. Whenever one added the other had to match. Now with the change in the administration of ground delays. The incentive would be the other way. If one kept 6 flights a day in small aircraft and the other changed to 3 flights a day in medium aircraft, it wouldn't take long for the traveling public to realize that there schedule is much more reliable on the larger aircraft. This would then translate into the competitive edge going not to the airline that has the greatest frequencies, but to the airline that has the larger planes serving the market. While 747's are never going to make sense in this market, it will change the balance towards a larger airplane with less frequencies.

With the FAA publicizing that the ground delays are going to be administered in this fashion, the traveling public will then be able to choose based on size of airplane and the airlines will be further influenced to "rightsize" the airplane for the market, rather than increase the frequencies.

When I was in the military I was based in California and virtually every highway in that state (as is now the case in almost all the others) had a "carpool" lane. This program was set up to allow those cars that are carrying the most people to travel more quickly. It wasn't put into place to reward the people that were already travelling in carpools, it was put into place to encourage more people to travel in larger groups. I believe that this program was successful on our roadways and would be even more successful on our airways.

-Bob Neil